

LIGHT DISTANCES: AN EYEWITNESS REPORT

LESLIE FULLER

**The "television generation" refers to children who grew up with four eyes
and no mouth.**

Fred Allen, Radio Artist

ible, simply by changing channels.

Radio, unlike children, was meant to be heard but not seen. One of the seminal conceptual artists of the mid-century, Edgar Bergen, had a child made of wood. His name was Charlie McCarthy. He was a dummy. Edgar was a ventriloquist, who threw his voice to Charlie in a radio act, even though such a trick, by popular convention, is meant to be seen in order to be appreciated.

Charlie and Edgar later became a big hit on television, too, though you could no

longer classify their *folie a deux* as conceptual. Television, like a child who is perceived to be the next messiah, was meant to be seen (and heard) by as many people as possible, all at once. But there are some very clever people out there—call them video artists—who, for the past twenty-odd years, make television that is meant to be seen by a few, at different, private moments. Inversely, imagine that the novel, meant to be seen by many, but very privately, one-at-a-time, becomes a “mass” performance event, seen by many but minus the privacy, i.e.: Pile into the bus! Next stop Madison Square Garden for an SRO viewing—page by page, via giant screen projection—of Thomas Pynchon’s latest book! (His fans assemble for a Read-In. Validated Parking. Cold beer.)

If, as many artists who prefer “video” to the word “television” believe, a medium designed for mass appeal can be solemnized into a private ritual, then why can’t the art sacrament be, like a papal blessing, dispensed to a teeming crowd?

I think we’re entering a period in which it is “television” which is becoming “personal”, while “video art,” as it is called, is becoming didactic. I think that “television”, which is such a child, is being deemed, in some circles, to have a postmodernism before it is old enough to have a modernism. The kid learns to read before she can walk. Precocious? Stay tuned. Stay very tuned.

Whoever is talking to you about this is a dummy. With no mouth. The real voice is being thrown from a distance, even here. So, the next time you touch that dial, st

T.R. Uthco (Doug Hall, Jody
Procter, Diane Hall)
video artists,
Eternal Frame

Q: Would you call this "art"?

A: It's not not 'art'.

traffic jam outside on the freeway. Here in the editing room in Burbank, California, there is a dish of trail mix on the console. Yesterday—different editing room, different part of Burbank—it was goldfish crackers. The day of the goldfish I was a writer/producer editing an NBC Television special starring Dolly Parton, Kenny Rogers, and Willie Nelson. Today, the day of the raisins and nuts, I'm researching this arts council funded essay on 'video art' and observing the editing of a public television sponsored documentary on the conceptual artist, Chris Burden. Welcome, Mouseketeers (which is what I choose to call

Helen Segalove,
video artist,
*The Pastrami
Sandwich*

"Baby Boomers"), to the Wonderful World of Dissonance. Cognitive, that is. Swimming pools, movie stars. From goldfish to trail mix. From high art to low art. TV is a two-faced, worrisome thing that leaves you to watch the radium blues in the night. To further mangle Johnny Mercer, that debonair

TV brings some people the world. It brings some people the universe. It brought Danny a pastrami on rye.

safely graze, Don't mind me. I'm no expert on video art. I work mostly in commercial TV, music and films. And I have occasionally worked within the non-profit "art" world, in the video and audio genres. I know something about both the "rituals of Hollywood" and "the rituals of art." I've probably seen more independent television and made myself aware of more literature related to its concerns than 99% of my fellow writer types who are, first and foremost, in the entertainment field. Maybe I'm a hack manquee. I think like an artist and I work like a showbiz goon. Which means I'm simultaneously abstract and lit with a purist flame while being a workaholic careerist determined to pay my bills. NOT get rich, just pay my bills. I'm not in showbiz for the money, which probably makes me insane, and

an unreliable narrator. It's not, as a few art world cuties sometimes blandish, a form of "schizophrenia." It's just a failure (or, perhaps, a successful refusal) to cling unquestioningly to the highly standardized, "politically correct" *art vs. commerce* distinctions. I mean, the year I created a kids' puppet series for commercial TV was the same year I wrote and performed in a Nam June Paik video. The year I worked for the Museum of Contemporary Art—Los Angeles (MOCA) producing a documentary on the artistic process was the same year I spewed out a one-hour comedy pilot for CBS. And these days I'm telling a couple of big deal movie studio types to shove it for a few weeks while I finish this article, which is as important to me as a major motion picture. So I'll understand if you'd rather not read on. I'm not ins

Umberto Eco,
print artist,
*Travels In
Hyperreality*

Once upon a time there were the mass media, and they were wicked, of course, and there was a guilty party. Then there were the virtuous voices that accused the criminals. And Art (ah, what luck!) offered alternatives, for those who were not prisoners of the mass media. ...Well, it's all over. We have to start again from the beginning, asking one another what's going on.

inserting sweet potatoes into one's privates. Me, I became aware of independent television about ten years ago, when I was introduced to it not professionally but socially, by a would-be artist—a restless cadet of the downtown New York art scene, with whom I had a personal relationship. I had a few decent credentials in entertainment writing and journalism. I was used to the grind. I identified myself as “a worker among workers”,

selling words to make the rent. And yet, I struggled to carve out an artistic vision. It was not tranquil. My tendency to treat a \$500 assignment and a \$20,000 assignment with the same sacred zeal struck the would-be artist as profoundly foolish, even irrational. I felt then, as I feel now, that all roads—be they cheap dirt trails or gleaming Autobahns—lead to Rome. He felt that the degree of energy I put into a project should be commensurate with how much I was getting paid for it. The would-be artist and I clashed, but the

Jean Baudrillard,
idea artist,
*Requiem for the
Media*

concurrent exposure to the “art world” changed my life forever. Ironically, it was I, the showbiz compulsive, who turned out to be primarily attracted to “the rituals of art” whereas the would-be artist turned out to be fundamentally drawn to “the rituals of Hollywood.” Sometimes the one who opens the door is the last to leave the room. You’re probab

The present form of the media induces a certain type of social relation (assimilative to that of the capitalist mode of production). But the media contain, by virtue of their structure and development, an immanent socialist and democratic mode of communication, an immanent rationality and universality of information. It suffices to liberate this potential.

but I never craved the “artist” moniker. Maybe I didn’t have enough self esteem. Still, everything I attempted—a sitcom, a TV pilot, a *National Lampoon* article—had to be a poetic masterpiece. This approach pretty much rules out any serenity in your life till you get very accustomed to it. But I don’t believe in any other way of working than to give it

your all. And I'm here to tell you that it's safe to walk around the big bad world of commercial TV wearing artist's slippers.

What I tell people, and what I'm telling you, is that I make art for people who don't necessarily know what art is. If the "Homeless" deserve attention, don't the "Artless?"

My complaint is that there seem to be so few "video" and "television" people who think like "filmmakers." That is, who spend time in *both* the "art" and the "commercial" playgrounds. Only when there are more "televisionmakers", who look beyond the dreary table tennis of the standard art-commerce dialectic, to a more media-expansive, state-of-the-art endeavor, will any of us know what game we're all really playing. And

Michael Smith,
video artist,
"Mike"

Some people are born to win. Some people are born to lose. Then there are people like me and you.

in the days before censorship. And even though they became my closest friends, I used to feel kind of insecure around *real* artists, work-wise. My labors were contextualized so as to encourage whatever legitimate scorn artists might harbor toward low art or pop culture. But the fact is the people who have made me feel the most secure about my work as an "entertainment" writer have turned out to be, interestingly, painters and sculptors and critics in the New York art world. It's pretty flattering to have a successful, intellectually discriminating painter put down his Derrida to read my latest screenplay. The art world types I hang around with have been my educators. They take their own work seriously. So they took mine seriously. And thanks to them, I think, I've learned

how to do that, too.

Especially this one couple I know and love, two well-respected New York painters. They'd show me their latest opera and discuss their work process with me. In return, I'd show them a batch of *Saturday Night Live* sketches or something. In fact, it was because of this couple that I wound up working on *The Tracey Ullman Show* for a while. I hadn't paid much attention to it. (I write for TV but I don't necessarily like to watch it.) Well, it was their favorite show and they got me to watch it with them. I went back to California and got a job writing for it. I told the show's producers that they had a cadre of loyal fans back east in the art world, a bunch of famous painters. This did nothing to relieve the producers' concerns about *The Tracey Ullman Show*'s continuously low ratings, but it might have helped them understand why my material, by Tinseltown standards, is always considered "sophisticated". Little do the suits know that when I'm asked to write for 100 million semi-literate viewers, their Nielsen-defined chunk of that mythical turf known as "Middle America", my own personal target audience is a handful of New York City painters. Still, they put my stuff on the air, most of the

Charles Osgood
TV commentator, on
Keith Haring's
subway murals, from
*Famous For Ten
Minutes*, by Carole
Anni Klonarides,
video artist

Is it "art?" There doesn't seem to be any question about it. Even though he gets fancy prices for his paintings, it's back down into the subway. Art, for the price of a subway token.

hamsters, funnels, the whole ball of wax. I wrote a couple of episodes for the TV comedy series *Mork and Mindy* in the late seventies. At the time I was moonlighting as a counselor

to autistic kids in California. One of them told me his favorite show was *Mork and Mindy* because he felt, as an autistic, that he was an alien from another planet and could readily identify with Robin Williams' character, who actually was an extraterrestrial. I decided to write an episode in which Mork befriends a retarded teenager A) because, the romance and popularity of the film *Rain Man* notwithstanding, 50% of all autistic are also retarded, and B) because explaining autism in 22 minutes (sitcom time, minus commercials) is not viable. But my intended audience, the group of autistic kids I worked with, didn't need explanations. They were the best audience I'll ever have, even better than the painters.

your
correspondent,
*Mousterpiece
Theater*
created by Bob
Cunniff,
television artist

A few years later, as the only non-art world person at a media arts panel at the Women's Interart Center in New York City, I used this episode as an example of how people actually make meaningful work in the corporate TV genre. The other panel participants—videoists, curators, theorists, funders, straight-up art mavens—tolerated my presence very well. My commercial television work was put into the context of the art scene and dignified, which sort of surprised me. I never told the *Mork and Mindy* producers, though, because they could have cared less. Lamentably, we

Ah ha. You find yourself watching "Mouseterpiece Theater" for the first time and you ask yourself "Why?" The answer, dear amigos, lies in these words by Oscar Wilde: "Simple pleasures are the last refuge of the complex." I'm your host, George Plimpton, looking down with you at the bullring of those ferocious distinctions, simplicity and complexity, the prime turf of Walt Disney.

In 1947, Walt Disney produced an extremely thought-provoking motion picture, *Straight Shooters*, which starred Donald Duck and his nephews, Huey, Dewey, and Louie, the doyens of the realm of water fauna. As you watch them, please keep in mind the words of Charles Baudelaire, whose poem, *Correspondences*, is of great help in attempting to deconstruct the special world Donald Duck created for us.

*Comme de longs echos qui de loin confondent
Dans une tenebreuse et profonde unite
Vaste comme la nuit and comme la clarte
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se repondent.*

(An English translation ran across the screen in chyron. A Disney short cartoon followed. We did eighty of these shows with George Plimpton in 1983-84, a direct satire on PBS-TV's *Masterpiece Theater*. Our puckish series went on to win kudos and awards and has never stopped running on The Disney Channel.)

but I don't want you thinking it's all peaches, cream and secondary application of a liberal arts education. I'm not tripping any light, Tinseltown fantastic. I'm just seasoned, by now. Though the museum world has been pretty charitable about taking my showbiz efforts seriously, the showbiz world isn't so hospitable toward the "artful" aspects of my endeavors.

Jack Webb,
probably not an artist,
Dragnet

This is the city. Los Angeles, California. I work here.

It's not that entertainment industry executives are antagonistic to adding the spice of art to their "Cream of Nowhere Soup", it's just that they tend not to believe anything really exists until they themselves have produced it. So basically, in order to get something new and interesting on the tube you have to make your executives think it's new and interesting but not all *that* new or interesting. You let them think that *they've*

discovered what you've known for decades. The amount of energy involved in affecting this manipulation is usually less than what it takes to write effective grant proposals, get accepted into artists' colonies, raise independent production money, or secure a part-time teaching job at an art school. Just think

David Lynch,
TV and
filmmaker, as
quoted by
Richard B.
Woodward,
*The New York
Times Magazine*,
on the ABC-TV
series *Twin
Peaks*

The constraints of television, with its censors and blocks of time, don't seem to have bothered David Lynch. "We lucked out on the pilot, and everything fit just right", he says.

tion. What an independent video producer (a/k/a/ a "video artist") fears that working in big time television is like and what it actually *is* like, are typically very different. One of the reasons that commercial television is so routinely lackluster and insipid is because there aren't enough "artists" willing to crack it. It's a battlefield out here. Television needs more people with artists' concerns, the same way politics needs idealists. If TV were

Cuba, and this was the 1960s, I'd say "Venceremos!" Like any jungle, there are scorpions and swamp critters, but no one ever said it was going to be Club Med. And

Bruce Ferguson,
visual arts critic and writer

The disdain in which many in the so-called "art world" hold mass television or commercial television is symptomatic of most American intellectuals' disdain for, and profound lack of interest in, public art in general.

her nude body covered with chocolate. In 1989 I was a writer/producer for a network TV special, the one I mentioned earlier, starring Kenny Rogers, Dolly Parton, and Willie Nelson, three dirt poor Southern kids who became millionaires. The executive producer was Ken Kragen, the guy who gave us *We Are The World*, and *Hands Across America*. Sort of the Mary Boone of soft pop rock. The centerpiece of the special was a six-minute music video—very high tech, very sci-fi—by the respected, offbeat music video and film director, Julien Temple. The rest of the special was a joint performance by Kenny, Dolly and Willie before a gargantuan crowd on the grounds of the Johnson Space Center (NASA) in Houston, surrounded by lots of antiquated moon rockets. Already, we're chest deep in cognitive dissonance. Plus, they hire me as the main "creative" force and I'm off and running trying to book the cast of *Sarafina!* (the Hugh Masekela South African Broadway musical), Sweet Honey in the Rock, (the feminist modern gospel *a capella* ensemble), Bob Telson's music (from *Baghdad Cafe* and *The Gospel at Colonnus*) and Dr. Stephen Hawking (the physically incapacitated British physicist specializing in Black

Holes, who wrote *A Brief History of Time* on a computer that allows someone who can't move even a muscle to write a book.) If you don't think mixing up Dolly Parton and Stephen Hawking on the same show doesn't stir-fry your brain cells, think again.

No one, on this show, had heard of any of the artists I was trying to book, but neither did they object to my suggestions. The reason none of the suggestions actually appeared on this particular TV special was not because of the self-limiting nature of television, but because the aforementioned artists had scheduling conflicts with our shoot dates. And, in the case of Dr. Hawking, I assembled a filmed montage about him but threw it out of the show at the very last second because we ran out of air time, to everyone's regret, even Ken Kragen's.

Sometimes, just to see if anyone was paying attention, I'd offer to book one of Nam June Paik's favorite acts (though I didn't mention Nam June Paik by name), such as *Urban Sax*, an ensemble I'd worked with in Paris. They are thirty-or so multi-national saxophonists who dress head-to-toe in white "ghost" sheets, suspend themselves high from the exteriors of many-storied buildings, and dangle upside down while playing atonal saxophone sounds in unison. I suggested that we string a bunch of them up on one of the moon rockets while Willie Nelson sang *Stardust*. It was a kick to watch the reactions of a production staff whose main experience up till then had centered around things like *The Gong Show* and *The Kenny Rogers Celebrity Tennis Tournament*. Of course, they all thought I was an artsy fartsy hooligan, but they've all asked to work with me again anyway. And the next time, I assure you, the Stephen Hawking element won't get bumped. (note: Erroll Morris, the documentary filmmaker, turned televisionmaker, who did *The*

Thin Blue Line and *Gates of Heaven* is creating an entire special based upon *A Brief History of Time* for a new anthology series on NBC prime time TV). Steven Spielberg is the

John Hanhardt,
Curator of Video,
The Whitney Museum
of American Art,
Catalogue to the 1989 Biennial

The privileging of traditional art forms is being challenged today as artists seek to introduce art into the public sphere through the media of our time.

in *Cinema Paradiso* (Tornatore's Oscar-winning film), when the projectionist shows the movies inside the movie theater, as usual, they're movies. When, to accommodate the burgeoning crowds, he turns the projector onto the wall, and shows the same film outside so that even the fishermen in their boats can see it, it's television. Magnitude of %f1\$% XXZ)&H soiu*!oo

Leslie Stevens,
Playwright/
Producer,
The Outer Limits,
a television series

There's nothing wrong with your television set. Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We are controlling transmission.

and speaking of Nam June Paik, he had to be one of the coolest TV variety show producers ever. That's what he was when I worked with him on *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, a live satellite, trans-atlantic variety show which aired New Year's Day, 1984, and which Mr. Paik went on to re-cut as a work of "video art". *Urban Sax* dangled from outside the Georges Pompidou Center (Beaubourg). Charlotte

Moorman, Allen Ginsberg, Laurie Anderson, Merce Cunningham, etc., performed bits in either New York or Paris. The two cities were "connected" by satellite, and the instantaneity of this global gerrymandering was the aspect Mr. Paik seemed most excited about. Oh yeah, George Plimpton was this program's emcee, too, fresh from *Mouseterpiece Theater*. I was one of two writers who were, in addition, performing on the show. Mr. Paik was doing all the things Ken Kragen does—raising money, grabbing publicity, coddling talent, raising money, promoting the show, computing budgets, raising money, hiring staff, taking meets, and raising money. Though he was by far the loosest producer I've ever worked for, Mr. Paik was no different, in his immediate objectives than any other TV mogul.

The day before the broadcast, at a Paris reception for the international press, Mr. Paik, with deadpan blitheness, introduced me—an obscure young writer who only just happened to be *dabbling* as a performer in this particular TV special—as a Big American Star, a Household Word Back In The United States. The Asian and European reporters, at least, bought it, hook, line and sinker. They pricked up their ears—more press coverage for the show and its *real* stars—and I got fussed over to boot.

Which meant I could ask skeptical, immaculately dressed French producers to bring me campari-and-sodas on the day of the live transglobal telecast, while I waited on my set, unable to leave until the satellite returned to proper functioning so that I could perform one of my little comedy bits. I got the "star" treatment. But the satellite transmission remained snafued for a long time and I put away several camparis as I remained poised, in this "on deck" mode, draped in a truly outrageous, Flopsy-Mopsy

costume from a cheap Broadway theatrical warehouse. It was a sort of Lucille Ball On Angel Dust outfit. Quite in contrast to my set, for this bit, which was the Braque wing of the Beaubourg Museum. Lots of perfect, priceless Braques—very brown and beige and subtle—behind me, dolled up like Fanny Brice at Bellevue. Unfortunately, technical difficulties forced the cancellation of this particular sketch, which was really too bad, because had the increasingly skeptical French crew actually gotten to see what was planned as a sort of *homage* to Imogene Coca, my presence in that austere shrine of western art decked out like Cyndi Lauper's idiot grandmother might have been slightly more forgivable. But the Frenchmen had to endure it, you see, because I was a Household Word back in the States.

I was pampered and deferred to not because French TV crews are by nature sycophantic coddlers. The entire unwieldy, impossible production of *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* happened only because of Nam June Paik's brilliance as an impresario. For sheer entrepreneurial chutzpah, I'd pick him over Ken Kragen, or Allen Carr, or Bill Graham, etc.—any of those Big Event Producers—any day of the week. Nam June struck me as a committed artist who was fearless about using certain tools of commerce for his personal ends. The difference between him and your basic showbiz tycoon is that the ends Mr. Paik so zealously serves are artistic, whereas the tycoon's standard ends are profit-oriented.

Through working under Mr. Paik, I observed how startlingly similar the means to those two ends can be. A visionary artist can also be a master at masterminding, and controlling the means of production which is what Mr. Paik did, and does. He is a wonderful example of successful audacity. Once you've accepted the implications of such

an example, it is no longer outlandish to imagine that you can beat the industry at its own game.

Shalom
Gorewitz,
video artist,
*The End of
Television*

Corporate buildings and television are both reflective of idealized realities. Both are hypnotic and narcissistic. We stare in but only see ourselves. Television consumes cultures and spits it out. It's a robotic magnifier of psychological terrain. Everything is condensed and intensified. Meanwhile, more friends, meadow-jumpers, died. Buildings continue to burn. How does one make art in times like these?

With all this exuberant blacklisting by the extreme right.

It was the legendary actor Edmund Keane who is supposed to have said, on his deathbed, "Dying is easy. Comedy is hard." Both activities, it seems, are struggling these days for access to dignity. Performance and video artists, I'm convinced, have concretely enhanced the dignity of the term "comedy" in this country. They have brought to the genre a respect it does not basically enjoy in the film and television entertainment world. There, comedy is a child of a lesser god. The "sitcom" and other such banalities have served to convince American audiences of the uselessness of the comic form. Within the entertainment industry, comedy—like movie car crashes and TV soap operas—is perceived to be a utility more than a craft. A utility, like tap water. This comedy-on-tap approach is emphasized by the decisions of several major pay cable companies to inaugurate "All Comedy" channels, which aspire to serve up comedy on a non-stop basis.

Soon, you may be able to buy a cup of comedy at your local 7-Eleven twenty-four hours a day. "Humor"—or rather certain people's definition of it—has become the fast food of the entertainment business.

And so it's been quite valuable and inspiring for me to observe that video artists who present straightforward comic narratives in their work are allowed to enter into the same museum world programs as video artists who deal with imagery, abstraction, technology, dance, or media theory. In the universe of video art, comedy gets what Rodney Dangerfield never gets.

Unfortunately most people never see video art. Its influence is restricted. In my case, however, a little has gone a very long way. That Chip Lord's *Motorist* was featured in the Whitney Museum's 1989 Biennial was a pleasure to many of us who not only admire Lord's work, but who understand that something can be humorous, accessible, narrative, and still be considered "art".

I've followed Lord's career for a few years, ever since I just happened to be in the same room with some people who were viewing *Easy Living* back in 1984. It was unforgettable, even to someone as peripheral to "video art" as I am. There are no humans in the piece, only models of cars, houses, and suburban living. "Dollhouse" stuff. Or elements from an electric train set. A car wash. A freeway, etc. But with the complete real life sound effects. It's just another automated day of leisure in America's golden land. And everyone who was watching *Easy Living* that first time was cracking up. It was too charming to have to explain why it was so funny. If we are being subsumed by technology, if we are being depersonalized and our humanity pillaged, then what a swift

trick it was for Lord to sum up our depravity in such a cheerful way by giving us a piece about human activity minus the humans. A model movie. Triumphantly arch.

Lord seems to allow our culture's regimentation to exist without protesting it. Maybe he's just a laid back California guy, a beach bum video artist. I don't know him. But for me he locates the inscrutable romance of the Nintendo culture. Highlighting our vapidness without a sneer is an amazing talent. Lord has the expansiveness to accept the feeling reality behind the machine, to celebrate emotionalism within the very system that would stamp it out. It's not nostalgia. It's fearlessness. In *Ballplayer*, Lord reflects on the National Pastime in tandem with a meditation on the slow, very slow, healing of a broken heart. Like baseball is to some, this video is pure poetry. I guess men have feelings after all. How

Eric Flechl,
painter and part-
time comedian

I am the audience. I make art as a way of confronting my own sense of non-existence, to the point where I can see that it's okay.

What many "artists" do that many "entertainment writers" do not is project an assessment of their current culture. Your basic TV writer is trying to deliver the status quo. Any commentary is fresh only in the sense that "freeze dried" is fresh. What Chip Lord is able to do in *Motorist* is deliver many things a good TV writer would want to do PLUS everything a good artist would want to do.

Motorist is, however, quite laconic. It drawls. There is not enough plot or action to satisfy your basic TV executive. It is a road movie and road movies cannot help but

meander. In movies and in television, we the writers are supposed to give an "arc" to this meandering. ("Arc" is the new favorite word in Hollywood development circles. It sounds less pedestrian than "plot".)

In *Motorist*, Chip Lord proceeds with the reality-based subtlety that an actual road trip might require. It is essential to the feeling of the piece that we "experience" a long, cross-country ride. But the pace of an actual 3,000 mile drive is not what the entertainment world endorses. The entertainment value of a piece is in direct correlation to how swiftly you can move an audience through a series of events without their missing what you've skipped over. *Motorist* is paced far more in real-time than in movie-time, which is one reason why it would never work on "television". But if the piece were "compressed" into movie time, it would never work as art. To appreciate what Lord is trying to express about the car culture, we must experience some of the aimlessness and unstructured time that goes along with driving.

In the "entertainment" world, the story (arc) must resolve itself way beyond what Aristotle proposed. Aristotle did not insist that all characters wind up happy. Lately I've been noticing that I'm not only supposed to write a happy ending, I'm supposed to show what the major characters *learn* from the events of the movie. (Morality tales, after all, would be what we could expect from a society that seems so comfortable with its Christian right wing.)

The chief paradigm that entertainment executives worship is *Rocky*, which is essentially a refurbished Horatio Alger arc. In America even a lowly bum can be a big star. Please prove this by showing us how a dysfunctional ne'er-do-well winds up Number One.

Allen Rucker,
television
producer,
former member
of TVTV,
a video
documentary
collective

Display for us now that everything is, in fact, all right. Tell me a story, Uncle Walt.

Why so many artists hate stories is because they were inundated with such bad stories on TV when they were kids. Artists often feel they have to create a language to break out of that—to get away from the bad stories that their parents accepted without protest.

that when most of us think of "video art" we do not think in terms of story. We usually think conceptual exploration, juxtaposed images, installations, activist video, documentary, dance or theoretical investigation. Many artists will not entertain the "N" word. Narrative is anathema. It implies that you have accepted middle class strategies and values. It implies limited thinking. It is pre-modern.

Chip Lord's work is about as close as video art will get to the "N" word. I don't claim that *Motorist* should be compared to conventional narrative. The ways in which it is *not* like a story are as important as the ways in which it is. *Motorist* demonstrates how long-form, single-screen video "art" can incorporate *certain* aspects of "entertainment value" without renouncing its place on the altar of the art world.

It is worth considering whether the reverse may also be possible: that you can incorporate "art value" without renouncing your cabin on the cruise ship of the entertainment world.

The wh

EXT. AMARILLO GRAIN FIELD - LATE AFTERNOON

MOTORING, by MARTHA & THE VANDELLAS CONTINUES, V.O. Near "Amarillo" road sign, ten 'fifties Cadillacs are up-ended in the middle of nowhere, partially buried. "Pop Art". Fern focuses the camera on them and races back to join Carmen and the three girls for a grinning group portrait, with Cadillacs. As they all return to the car, Athena takes out photo of the rock star, Prince, tears it up, and lets the pieces fly into the wind.

your correspondent,
Shameless, a feature film script,
Warner Brothers

ATHENA

I'm never gonna love anybody else the way I loved him. Guess there's only one thing to do. Lock up my heart, throw away the key and become a lesbian.

Candy and Cookie nod sagely. Fern nearly chokes.

and of course my admiration for Chip Lord includes his earlier work, with Hudson Marquez and Douglas Michaels, as part of the video team, Ant Farm. In the '70s Ant Farm issued a now classic video, *Cadillac Ranch*, which depicted their installation piece of ten old Cadillacs buried in an Amarillo grainfield. (Cars are clearly Chip Lord's drug of choice.) When I was writing the road movie, *Shameless*, for Warner Brothers, a friend in the art world suggested I have the characters pass by the Cadillac Ranch, since they

happened to be in the neighborhood. I looked up Cadillac Ranch in the AAA regional guidebook.

T.R. Uthco,
video artists,
Eternal Frame

Q: Is this art?

A: What it is is figuring out what it is.

Q: Well, if you get any ideas, let me know.

A: Okay. I'll keep you posted.

of the other independent television artists whose belief in humor as an art form has resurrected my own. I think I have literally looked to art world humorists, including videoists, as a source of conviction at those times when I feel the need to defend my passion for using comedy as a means to epiphany. A sampling of artists I've looked to this way, in no particular order would be:

Bruce and Norman Yonemoto (*Blinky, The Friendly Hen* is so close to my heart. I've been known to bring it to friends' homes and make them watch it, whether they want to or not. The ten-year span of "blinky" pre-dates the kind of dead-pan silliness we associate with David Letterman.)

T.R. Uthco (*Eternal Frame* shows how you can make a national tragedy redeemably hilarious. The Kennedy Assassination? Oh yeah. It was a scream. As Horkheimer is quoted in the introduction to Peter Handke's *A Moment of True Feeling*, "Violence and inanity -- are they not ultimately one and the same thing?")

Carole Ann Klonarides (*Art World Wizard* with John Torreano)

Peter Rosen (*Pressures of the Text*)

Skip Blumberg (The Charles Kuralt of the video community)

Laurie Anderson (Her choosing her own "clone" to co-host the series *Alive From Off Center*)

The Management of WPIX-TV/New York (For broadcasting *The Yule Log* for hours and hours and hours each Christmas)

Chris Burden (The funniest man alive, you bet)

Ilene Segalove (*Peggy Sue Got Married* meets *The Yule Log*)

Anything by William Wegman (from Man to Fay)

Henri Stendhal
print artist,
The Red and the Black

If you want to be a wit, develop your character and speak the truth.

banana peels. Michael Smith may be one of the best known video artists around, partly because he is something of an art world fixture, and partly because his work is accessible and travels well. He seem to thrive on collaboration with artists in other media. And lately he's become known as something of an Ed Sullivan in the downtown New York art community. His cabaret shows have brought avant garde works to the attention of the non-initiated.

Nam June Paik,
"La Vie, Satellites,
One Meeting—
One Life",
Video Culture

There is no rewind button on the Betamax of Life

Michael Smith's video/stage personality, "Mike" is an ombudsman for the shell-shocked. He is the Absolute Mouseketeer. He approaches life with the Television Generation's trademark flattened affect. With the dimwitted earnestness of Mr. Magoo, "Mike" seems to be lost in someone else's bad dream. He wants to be the hero of his own life. Trouble is, he can't find his life with both hands. It's fitting that one of his pet projects is building the perfect bomb shelter (*Mike Builds a Shelter*); "Not bad", he muses significantly, "I've got two hundred boxes of crackers down here."

Possessing the opposite of the Midas touch, everything "Mike" touches turns to smegma. And yet his efforts are extremely valiant, almost reality-based. His idea of a cause is to save the leaves. The dead ones. His heart's in the right place, even though he's brain dead. I identify with this.

What inspires me about Michael Smith's body of work—in addition to its being an incredibly long-running character study—is how intimate it all is. It's as though Smith is going for an *All "Mike" Channel* on Pay TV. We see Mike do every little thing, such as selecting his clothes. He makes—as the videotape "Mike" proclaims—"the ordinary extraordinary." We can even imagine "Mike" taking a dump or flossing his teeth. His stultification is that of a life spent watching TV.

Jeff Koons, media artist on "The Late Show",
Famous for Ten Minutes, by Carole Ann Klonarides

Wild Boy is very much embracing and loving
banality. Puppy is gagging and cynical. He
hates banality, when he is banality itself. The

much more positive attitude as far as I'm concerned is to embrace banality and not
be cynical.

wondering whether they're still boyfriend and girlfriend. Anyway, when I first began writing non-journalism about twelve years ago, I attempted to create a stage play which dealt with the coma-inducing effects of TV. I posited the idea of a disease caused by TV watching which rendered its victims paralyzed and necessitated a national telethon and a poster-child to promote a cure. I had at that time been a writer/producer for *Good Morning, America* and the experience had cauterized me with the knowledge that you can conduct an interview with Buckminster Fuller in which you sum up everything about him in six minutes.

It was while I was on staff of that show that Michael Arlen wrote a piece for *The New Yorker* on how we watch our morning news programs: We move from room to room, brushing our teeth, eating a muffin, tying a necktie, kissing each other good-bye and—incidentally—catching a fragment of morning television.

Arlen's experience in 1976 suggests the video style Michael Smith and Ilene Segalove, to name two, developed systematically over the next decade. Through inch-by-inch dedication to independent video, Michael Smith has given us an enduring Polaroid of ourselves as techno-dominated somnambulists. Smith's achievement is, of course, intended to be in the category of Chaplin, Keaton, and Woody Allen. But it is all right that he isn't that good or that interesting. "Mike" was never intended to be a film star on the Big Screen larger than life. "Mike" and the Small Screen are inviolately merged which is part of what makes "Mike" so *modern*. He is *smaller* than life.

Ilene Segalove is another artist who flirts brazenly with the "N" word. Her work is supremely accessible, yet not so accessible that you can't sit back and appreciate how smart it is. Her video pieces zero in on the narcissistic obsessions of the television

generation. Hers is the world of the Mickey Mouse Club charter member. Often, her pieces concentrate on her generation's "soma", i.e., television. In the Segalovian universe, a fitful childish population makes repeated stabs at optimism, as in *Dragnet Kiss* or *Why I Got Into Television*, or *The Pastrami Sandwich*. These are all short pieces that, like Chip Lord's work, address the human condition by eliminating humans from the picture. Segalove focuses the camera on objects rather than on people. They are objects as seen by the spaced-out. The result is a disturbingly humorous glimpse of the television culture's living room limbo. In it we're all overwhelmed. We try to reduce our confusion by adopting childhood ideation. Segalove's space cadets resemble the little boy in *My Life As*

Ilene Segalove and Jack Webb,
The Dragnet Kiss

A Dog, in their stoic determination to embrace their plight. Our "plight" is the repressed despair of the technologically overdosed: All safety and high tech convenience on the outside, all quivering mystification on the inside.

Their kiss made me strong enough to watch the final credits without shuddering.

The systematic meekness of the personality or non-personalities Ilene Segalove and Michael Smith create can be influential, even emboldening, to writers like myself. Every so often I'm asked to write a non-*Rocky* piece of material such as sketches for *The Tracey Ullman Show* where the characters are so often, like "Mike", victims of victimless crimes.

INT. A RESTAURANT

Your correspondent,
"The Real Thing",
The Tracey Ullman Show, Fox Television

**TERRY KNOCKS A FORK OFF THE TABLE,
LUANNE, THE WAITRESS, HANDS HIM
ANOTHER. AN ELECTRIC JOLT PASSES
THROUGH THE FORK AS THEY BOTH
HOLD IT. IT'S TRUE LOVE. TERRY MELTS. LUANNE TRIES TO FIGHT IT.**

TERRY
(A SOULFUL SILENCE)
Where have you been all my life?

LUANNE
Mississippi.

TERRY
**Really?!! I won a spelling bee in third grade with
that word! M-i-s-s-i-s-s-i-p-p-i!**

LUANNE
(ADORING) You spelled it perfectly.

TERRY

Thanks.

LUANNE

**I was never good at spelling. I like match.
And baseball.**

TERRY

**I was always the last person they picked to
be on the team.**

LUANNE

**(SITTING DOWN)I wasn't popular in
school. We were very poor.**

TERRY

**My folks got divorced when I was ten. Mom
moved a lot**

THEY LEAN ACROSS THE TABLE TO EACH OTHER, ARDENTLY.

LUANNE

I never went to parties. I went to the movies
instead. By myself.

TERRY

I saw *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*
twenty-nine times.

THEY CLASP HANDS PASSIONATELY ACROSS THE TABLE.

LUANNE

I spilled Kool-Aid on Mama's new sofa
when I was six. I wanted to go hide in the
cellar and whip myself with old ropes.

TERRY

Old ropes! Exactly! When I broke my dad's
razor I wanted to jump in a manhole with
sewer rats!

LUANNE

Me too. All the time. Sewer rats.

HYPNOTICALLY, THEY GET UP AND START SLOW-DANCING TO THE TORCHY MUSIC. THE REST OF THE ROOM FADES AWAY AND A LIGHT SHINES, JUST ON THE NEW LOVERS, LOST IN A WORLD OF THEIR OWN.

TERRY

I broke my leg jumping over a fire hydrant.

LUANNE

I broke my nose in a revolving door.

TERRY

I felt so different from the other kids.

LUANNE

Always on the outside looking in.

TERRY

Never before...

LUANNE

...til now.

THEY KISS.

"Good night Gracie".

One of the interesting things about *The Tracey Ullman Show* was that its creator/producer, James Brooks is a famous, Oscar-winning film director who will not give up on the small screen. In addition to creating *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Taxi*, Brooks launched (whether you like them or not) *The Simpsons*, in a television climate that was absolutely hostile to such extreme prime time novelty. Brooks could easily concentrate fully on movies but like a slowly increasing number of talented directors—he demonstrates that if he can be a filmmaker, he can be a *televisionmaker*.

John J. O'Connor,
television critic,
The New York Times
July 8, 1990

There is still plenty of junk, no doubt about it, but there is also an expanding willingness to take occasional chances...Television is far more likely than any current movie to grapple with pressing realities, from domestic abuse to the homeless to AIDS....As the opportunities for "serious" work in film are being pushed aside in the rush to blockbuster formulas, a growing number of name actors and directors are using television as an alternative outlet for their talent.

who killed Laura Palmer?

Still in the category of comedy and the "N" word, I'm struck by the work of Mako Idemitsu. In particular, her meditative, wickedly humorous piece, *Kiyoko's Situation*, which poignantly addresses the role of the woman artist in society. Idemitsu examines the outsider status of the unmarried, un-famous woman artist, and her family's stolid lack of support for her life choices. It's so lonely, so sad, and so funny. Kind of like

an after-hours-club Wendy Wasserstein on her seventh shot of tequila contemplating suicide while watching a live sex show.

I especially liked in *Kiyoko's Situation*, a scene reminiscent of David Lynch. We see Kiyoko, the despairing anti-heroine, pulling up handfuls of strange fluffy stuff. Handful after dreamlike handful. Only gradually does Idemitsu let us know that Kiyoko is obsessively, vacantly, tearing the stuffing out of a quilt. It's a startling visual "reveal" that evokes—beyond one's capacity to make anything but phenomenological connections—the character's frustration with regard to the world of domesticity.

Eric Fischl

I am making art to correct something.

particularly the situation of kids in Punjab. And of course in addition to comedy, I like other forms: **Mystery** (Cecilia Condit's *Possibly in Michigan*); **News** (Rea Tajiri's *Off Limits*); **Travel** (Juan Downey's *Return of the Motherland*; **Montage** (Edin Velez' *Meaning of the Interval*); **Romance** (early Sanborn and Fitzgerald, such as *Static*); and **History** (Steve Fagin's *The Amazing Voyage of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Roussel*.)

That is to say, though I stumbled into the world of video art via show business, I'm not someone whose tastes are restricted to those artists who embrace the "N" word. What I am most excited by are installations. In particular works by Bill Viola, Bruce Nauman, Nancy Burson, Doug Hall, and of course, Nam June Paik.

As a brand new way of authoring an "art" experience, installation video truly separates "video" from Television-With-A-Capital-T. I guess that gives video a capital V. Video installation's practitioners are liberated from the endless frustrating comparisons

that single screen videoists live with. When video art was still fundamentally a single screen event, like Living Room Television, it had always to be defined by what it was not. It was always an alternative to something else, despite everyone's earnest denial of such a

Barbara London, Assistant Curator of Video,
The Museum of Modern Art, "Striking A Responsive Chord",
The Second Link: Viewpoints on Video in the 'Eighties

shadow existence. Installation video has given video its first healthy acceptance of a non-codependent identity.

At this point there are mature artists who understand the potentials of the video medium.

homoerotica, religious icons, nude children.

I'll never forget seeing Bill Viola's Room for *St. John of the Cross* for the first time. France 1984. Discovering this installation was like visiting, involuntarily, a brand new foreign country. I had turned the corner in the museum from some predictable exhibit—more paintings, more sculpture—to find myself face to face with something that had more to do with eternity than anything I'd seen in years. You exit off the Long Island Expressway to find yourself in Annecy. What happened? There was the mountain. There was the little room with the little TV, the ceiling too low for its occupant to stand up. I had another, other worldly experience when I found myself in the lobby of the Whitney Museum a few years later, stepping into Viola's *Sleep of Reason*. I waited in semi-darkness between his millisecond nightmares. The power of Viola's situation rooms is greater than whatever analysis I come up with.

With the subject of video, the case of defining it in terms of its machinery does not seem to coincide with accuracy and my own experience of video keeps urging me toward the psychological model.

the "chrome-a-lume" of Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*.

Bruce Nauman's installation work strikes at a more intellectual level, but I still wind up hypnotized eventually. Typically I'm the last to leave the gallery, the one the guards have to wake up and drag out. Maybe I was one of those kinds who sat in laundry rooms watching the clothes dryer go around. Maybe it was much too much LSD in college. I've visited Nauman's *Clown Torture* several times now and the more I see the predictable rhythms of its endless loop of silliness and frustration the more I want to keep watching it. How can that clown be so helpless? Why is he such a jerk? What do I want to do—rescue him or torture him myself? Video installation or video epilepsy?

Nauman's 1987 installation in the Whitney Museum lobby, *The Krefeld Piece*, also fascinated me. Two very discreet video monitors gave us a repertory company of selectively different people in close up each speaking an identical series of two-word sentences: "I Love. You Love. We love...I shit. You shit. We shit." etc., over and over. As active as the sentences were was as passive as I became. I was hooked. You were hooked. We were hooked.

William Blake, *Milton*

They became what they beheld.

Also remarkable is Nancy Burson's *A New Machine*, reprised along with *Clown Torture* in the 1989 Whitney Museum's Image World show. Burson's much praised photographic experiments which enmesh iconographic identities have led her to attempt similar experiments in video. The subject is pure identity diffusion. Her approach is pure "video game". In a quirky mixture of *The Twilight Zone* meets *PacMan*, Burson's installation lets us mingle our facial features with those of the celebrity of our choice via video tricks. Thanks to this unsettling little device, we are left with a sense that the "new machine" may not yet have a soul but at least it has a face.

We are after all in the first trimester of the fetal era of video intelligence. NOW there are interactive laser discs. THEN there was Mary Martin as Peter Pan. Peter's exhorting us in 1956 to "Clap, if you believe in fairies!" to save Tinkerbell's life was no doubt the first use of interactive video and it was built on faith. Faith in the perfectability of the television medium is why I don't give up altogether and a) go to medical school or b) write only movies which is what so many moguls in Tinseltown urge "good"writers to do. We are, they say, "too good for television". Perhaps but only through a glass darkly.

Douglas Davis,
video artist and writer,
"Essays on the Post Modern"
Video Culture

When I talk to students about video I always begin by asking them what "Television" is (because I don't know myself) and we always conclude, at the end of the session, that we aren't sure of very much. The more I work in it, the less I know.

faith to be tested. The first time I ever saw installation video, I think, was in the early eighties again in Paris, where an artist not then much known in the States Michel Jaffrenou, had set up dozens of video monitors to reconstruct the *I Ching*. The installation occupied the whole stage of a small museum theater. The audience area was crowded as it would be in a theater or film presentation. We were all willing to sit still and pay rapt attention to an absolutely non-narrative, non-theatrical, zen-like display. It had about as much momentum as a grandfather clock. And yet it was a moving experience. It's amazing how little is needed to hold our attention once we admit that we *believe*, and surrender to the alpha waves.

INT: SOUNDSTAGE - PRESENT DAY

CLOSE UP of Television Screen. On the screen, a body of blue water. nothing but water, moving in soft ripples. Seamless DISSOLVE TO smooth static on television screen, whose electronic beams also move in soft ripples on the TV surface.

(Music, *The Water is Wide* continuous in B.G.)

MARY (V.O.)

**I am an idiot in a box. I have four eyes and no mouth. I chew gum
with my eyes. I wake you up. I put you to sleep. I am everywhere at**

once. I am on the roof. I am underground.

SERIES OF LOCATION EXTERIORS - NIGHT

(Music, *The Water is Wide* continuous in B.G.)

Cheap, hand held footage of various exteriors showing windows with the familiar blue light of a television set shining from within. City windows. Rural windows. Little houses. Big houses. Poor. Rich. Big and small apartment buildings. Hotels, motels. Limousines. Gas Stations. Bars. Stores.

your correspondent,
The Rec Room,
a post-modern TV comedy

MARY (V.O. CONT'D)

Because it's lonely out there in the world, where the deer and the antelope play in the wild blue yonder across the wide Missouri on the trail of the lonesome pine down by the old millstream where I first met you, Old Man River. You are my sunshine. And nothin' could be finer than to be up the lazy river on that long, long trail awinding into the land of my dreams, in my old Kentucky home, in my old Nebraska home, where seldom is heard a discouraging word in a surrency with the fringe on top of Old Smokey. To that valley they say you are goin', down by the banks of the O-hio, by the water gently

flowing, Illinois, way down upon the Swanee River, all the live long day. Dinah, blow your horn. Look away, Dixieland. Goodbye, Old Paint. Swing low. Because I'm lost out here in the stars by the light of the silvery moon which, all too soon, in the sweet by and by, will slowly fade to black.

FADE TO BLACK the way the old television tubes used to do very slowly leaving for awhile, a pin-sized light in the center of the screen.

"trickle down" theory. Although many show business types are getting acquainted with the varieties of video experience, there is still an enormous lack of familiarity in the "entertainment" community with video art. Most people in Tinseltown don't even know there is such a thing, and this includes people who are reasonably astute collectors or observers of modern painting and sculpture.

For some weird reason, I often get selected for unusually Middle-of-the-Road writing jobs, even though people know me as a "fringe" (i.e., "New York" writer). The more conventional the assignment, the more I try to throw in elements from my video art education. I'm always surprised by the boldness of my suggestions, and even more surprised by the mainstream producers' acceptance of what I propose. Unlike those politicians who are attempting to foreclose on the artistic freedom enjoyed by grant recipients in this country, most Hollywood producers actually understand the folly of Contempt Prior to Investigation. I'd rather deal with Sammy Glick than Jesse Helms or Oliver North. (One of the only *public* events since the Hollywood Blacklist lately that

compares to what certain politicians are trying to do to American artists is the alleged attempt by powerful CAA agents and their friends to censure anyone who had anything to do with the John Belushi book and subsequent movie, *Wired*.)

Nam June Paik,
video pioneer,
The New York Times,
November 17, 1989

It was three hundred years after the invention of the printing press before there was a Shakespeare.

So there I was accepting a job to write and put together a one-person live show for Herb Alpert, the man who gave you *The Tijuana Brass* quite a while back. What I proposed to him was a collaboration between him and a video artist. I didn't shock Alpert the way I shocked the Kenny Rogers people because Alpert is actually an abstract painter and an ardent collector of Latin American art. Furthermore, one of his last music videos was directed by none other than Zbigniew Rybczynski, the video artist known for his homage/appropriation to Sergei Eisenstein, *Steps*. Alpert has so much success behind him that he wants to take chances now. He produces avant garde jazz artists, and is starting to work with hip hop bands and has dabbled collaboratively with Soul II Soul.

As it stands now, the project will feature Herb Alpert and a large video screen broken into at least six different sub-screens. At times it will seem like a dance club, I suppose. At times like a bank lobby. But there may be times when it will have that museum/gallery feel. For one musical piece, an early Alpert hit, *Rise*, I proposed that we show on the large screen the Michael Owen/Carole Ann Klonarides video *Cascade: Vertical Landscape*. I also mentioned Nam June Paik as a possible contributor. Alpert caught and considered every video concept I threw at him and even approved a sketch I wrote for him on the NEA's proposed "obscenity oath." There

OPEN ON HERB, WITH TRUMPET

HERB

your correspondent,
Herb Alpert: Picture This

I was reading about the National Endowment for the Arts the other day. About how the Endowment is now asking artists who want federal grants to sign an oath that their work won't be "obscene." And I couldn't help noticing that none of the artists in question were instrumental musicians. They were all painters, photographers, or performers. And it made me wonder: don't they think we musicians could be obscene if we wanted to be? How come Senator Jesse Helms doesn't call me up and say, "Herb, listening to you play *Tijuana Taxi* makes me want to find a woman with a bad reputation, possibly even a transvestite, and sin with her upside down and sideways till we both turn purple." But do jazz musicians get calls like that? Nooooo! Do you see anyone picketing Wynton Marsalis concerts? Is it fair? Just because we don't use words or pictures doesn't mean we instrumentalists can't be just as obscene as any other artists if we wanted to be! You don't believe me? I'll show you. I want you all to think about the most obscene thing you can.

(TO AUDIENCE MEMBER)

You too ma'am. I know you've had the thought many times before.

(TO EVERYONE AGAIN)

Okay. Got that obscene thought in your heads? Good. I'll bet this pretty much describes what you're thinking...

HERB PLAYS A HOT, RAUNCHY PIECE OF MUSIC. VA VA VOOM. IT EVOLVES INTO A SLOW, VERY EVOCATIVE AND SEXY LOVE TUNE.

ON VIDEO SCREEN: GORGEOUSLY SHOT EVERYDAY ACTS: SCREWING IN A LIGHT BULB. SUCKING ON A POPSICLE. PLUGGING IN A LIGHT SOCKET. KNEADING BREAD. FLUFFING PILLOWS. SPRAYING WITH A GARDEN HOSE. BRUSHING HAIR. KNITTING. PUTTING A HOT DOG ONTO A BUN, etc., etc.

when hell freezes over. As for recommending Nam June Paik as a possible contributor to the project, I wouldn't automatically assume the Alpert production would be so far beneath Paik's standards, especially if he were paid enough to funnel money into one of his own pet video projects. After all, Paik was selected to design the set for the CBS News *Sunday Morning* program with Charles Kuralt back in the '70s.

John Schott,
executive producer,
Alive from Off Center as quoted in
ART news, Summer 1989

The attempt to divide the world into high art and low art is increasingly a less productive concept. Many of the techniques and moods—irony, silliness—that used to be defined as alternative have now become mainstream. MTV has to a large extent coopted the world of avant garde film and video art.

who can tell? I've seen a bunch of video art, and naturally given my background it's been interesting to me that so much falls into two categories, or traps: the phenomenological and the hermeneutic if you will. In trying to make their personal form of television as differentiated as possible from something that lowly masses would identify with, *certain* videomakers seem to either a) seek to portray Television, fifty years after its invention, as an absolute phenomenon whose astonishing effects on us have yet to be publically considered, or b) cleave to the old repetitive harangue about the propagandist nature of commercial media.

An example of the "phenomenological" trap would be Charles Atlas' *As Seen on TV* with Bill Irwin. I admire Irwin's performance work enormously. However in *As Seen on TV*, Irwin's Keatonesque dummy accidentally happens on a—gasp?!—television set! Oh, my goodness! And, he proceeds to discover, with total and childlike mystification, that he can become "trapped" inside its screen. This was intended to have a clear phenomenological treatise that is also meant, I assume, to be charming and witty. But if you are willing to go along with the fact that a television set is one hundred per cent exotic to a white male healthy blonde performer, clearly in an urban entertainment environment (Irwin is pictured with other performers at a Broadway-style audition studio), well, then you have already agreed to close off several major portions of your cerebrum. If you are

willing to continue watching the tape with what remains active in your gray matter out of respect for Irwin's obvious gifts, then you must endure Irwin disappearing from the room and into the TV set, and back into the room, many, many times, always consumed with o'erweaning puzzlement. It is a cute, but standard technical feat which Mr. Atlas repeats relentlessly, without significant variation, until we are beaten over the head with an idea that was ancient to begin with: namely, that the television image is—hold on to your hats!—quite different from a real image and is both distorting, and

Ayn Foulter,
journalist and playwright,
Segue

—whoa, now!—confining. Be still, my heart.

I didn't say video artists are totally naive. But they are much more naive than artists in other media.

somewhere in between. Don't get me wrong. I love buttered toast. But it is not a taste sensation. Toast has been around. And if you present it to me on a silver platter under glass, with a sprig of parsley, and a Waterford goblet of eighty-year old Sancerre, I'm sorry. It's still toast. For decades and beyond, writers and artists have been pointing out that mechanical reproductive media, especially in the hands of the politically motivated, transform the experience of art and of reality. And for centuries prior to that it has been pounded into us that political leaders tend to use propaganda when addressing the masses. Just because artists working in electronic media have begun to read Orwell and Benjamin and the various *comme il faut* semiologists—doesn't mean we are entitled to assume our sense of revelation is exclusive. I mean, just because we are starting to incorporate these concepts into our own frames of reference doesn't make them new concepts. Exponents of

a newly-invented medium must still lodge themselves in the history of ideas.

(I am deliberately overlooking the videotapes I have seen by artists who deal with Big Time Television because they are ultimately fascinated by it and wish to become part of it. I've met many video artists who secretly or not so secretly hunger for show business careers.)

If it is incumbent on artists working in video to dish out cold leftovers of accepted intellectual theory, then it would make sense, wouldn't it, to add a little chutney to the meatloaf.

A few examples from the cinema: John Carpenter's 1988 film, *They Live*, adheres loyally to semiotic principles and yet manages to be inventive and entertaining. A vagrant finds a secret cache of special sunglasses which permit you to see the "real" (i.e.: black and white) propagandist messages behind glossy color media images.

Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo* is a lot more interesting in its through-the-looking-glass conceit than what Charles Atlas could come up with (even with Bill Irwin). Even *Poltergeist* cautions us that the television screen we're so comfortable with is a monster that sucks children into its rapacious gullet. When I see work such as *As Seen on TV* it doesn't feel like I'm in the presence of artists. It feels like I'm in the presence of

lecturers. In trying to make the case for more *televisionmakers*, I'm suggesting that the theories of media domination that so consume "lecturers working in video" can be presented with more reliance on imagination and less reliance on dogma.

Gretchen Bender,
videomaker,
TV: Text & Image

No criticism. Narcotics of surrealism. Public memory. Self censorship. Homeless. Military research. Dream nation. People with AIDS. Gender technology.

**Video. Film. Television. Image. Fragment. Excerpt. Manipulation. Landscape.
Context. Audience. Ratings. Content. Generic**

Muntadas,
videomaker,
Video is Television

the fact that the video piece we are looking at is NOT TELEVISION WITH A CAPITAL T. There seem to be video libraries full of tapes that seek to demonstrate that mass commercial television is full of manipulation, lies, subversion, and distortion. I have seen more tapes than I care to count that told me that the world of corporate communications is a commerce-oriented propaganda machine that manipulates the thoughts of its message receivers.

These "hermeneutical" lecturers working in video are exemplified by Gretchen Bender's work, or by the Max Almy's tapes, *Lost in the Picture* and *Perfect Leader*. I liked Almy's work in *The Thinker*. It was distinctive and funny, albeit didactic. But in *Perfect Leader* she uses crisp, high-density visuals against laborious, backyard-cheap-sounding audials which drone endlessly the line, "We have to have the perfect leader." Believe me, you get the point. The line is later referred to in the credits as a "song" which Almy has "composed." (Such overindulgent accreditation is usually restricted to lobotomized Heavy Metal bands.)

Almy's graphic composition is a perfectly bland, Reaganesque media-friendly WASP male face, which is altered with computer and video techniques until the "perfect look" is achieved. There you have the Awful Truth, folks: the ideal political candidate is a computer image. *Perfect Leader* is a sharp-looking video, but its point, shopworn to begin with, is made in the first twenty seconds. (One of the most outstanding weaknesses of the "video artist as lecturer" cadre is the tendency to overindulge oneself. Artists who do not talk down to their audiences tend to be more restrained.)

Thirteen percent of television sets are never on. Thirteen percent are never off.

McHugh-Hoffman,
Inc.
TV News
Consultants
McLean, VA

McHugh/Hoffman and Frank Magid Associates of Marion, Iowa were notorious back in the '70s for advising local news station to add patter, banter, sensationalism and the cult of personalities to their newscasts. In trying to demographically catalogue television viewers, organizations like "news consultants" and the Nielsen Ratings Group labor diligently to find out just what TV audiences watch, how often, when, and with whom. Yes, the corporate strategies can be insidious. But to whom are they most dangerous? Certainly not to Max Almy's and Charles Atlas' target audiences who, presumably, belong to that first thirteen percent of TV viewers whose TV sets are "never on." The "never on" group consists not surprisingly, of the educated, leisure, or moneyed classes in this country. The thirteen percent whose TV sets are never off, it was determined, belong to the least educated, least moneyed class.

It would be interesting if Max Almy, to name but one, made work addressing the megalomania of corporate television for distribution among the non-moneyed, non-educated Thirteen percent. But the irony is, videotapes like Almy's *Perfect Leader* are intended—and will only be seen by those, like you and me, who already share Almy's distrust about corporate media. People whose television sets are never off do not, as a rule, go to museums and galleries, subscribe to *October*, or audit lectures on Jacques Lacan.

But Almy and Atlas and Gretchen Bender are not going after those people. If I'm not mistaken, their gallery mailing lists are not crammed with addresses in the South Bronx, or Browning, Montana. But there are people in those places who might actually be intrigued by the idea that Big Brother is seeking to control their experience and that television and advertising media are unreliable narrators of our cultural history.

But you do not reach those people through "Video". You reach those people through
"Television." And you only reach them, I guess, if you identify with
your correspondent,
The Rec Room them.

INTERIOR A RUNDOWN TV SHOW SET - LIVE

SKIP

**Because it's lonely out there in the world! That's why we have
television!**

**SKIP'S JAZZ COMBO
(IN UNISON)
TV, TV!**

SKIP

**Yes, thanks to the miracle of TV, none of us ever has to be
lonely again in our own lifetime!**

**SKIP'S JAZZ COMBO
TV is the thing! It's the thing!**

SKIP

**Yes, be it ever so ho-humbly home, sweet home on the range,
or in the oven, here at last, you can look for the silver-lining.
(PAUSE) Or was it the union label?!**

In preaching to the already converted, like-minded cadets of the art world, Almy and her fellow lecturers are helping to preserve the banality of Television with a Capital T. The insistence on keeping complex ideas as far from the public experience as possible is a way of privatizing intellectual theory. Like privatizing property, it is an exercise of privilege.

Bruce Ferguson

The underestimating of audiences continues to make television a vast wasteland. But artists are just as guilty as executives. The rightest and leftist Intellectuals join with each other in a contempt for audiences.

I'm not suggesting that video lecturers move to Burbank and write episodes of *Growing Pains*. I'm suggesting that we need people with concerns like Almy's to participate more in the corporate television process. Just as badly, we need gifted teachers in public schools, as well as at Exeter. After Tim Rollins and K.O.S.—Bronx public school children in collaboration with Franz Kafka—why would anyone in the art world want to persist with the notion that the only appreciative art audiences and exponents are the cognoscenti?

I am aware that keen minds, such as critic Gene Youngblood's are adamant on this subject. "Personal vision is not public vision", he has written. "Art is not the stuff of mass communication." Yet I believe the gap between corporate television and video art is broadened unnaturally—beyond any "high" and "low" art distinctions—by untested perceptions in the art community where there is virtually no exposure to, or familiarity with, the real workings of corporate television. And so we are back to contempt prior to investigation.

The *a priori* dismissal of the artistic potential of large-audience television was a

healthy idea when there were only three networks and their commercials to watch in the '60s and '70s. But today it makes about as much sense as a blanket dismissal of the publishing industry due to the shallowness of *People*, *Time* and *Cosmopolitan*. What was politically correct has become xenophobic. There is a difference after all, between healthy suspicion and the belief in an Evil Empire.

Juan Downey,
video artist,
The Return of the Motherland

Mother was consumed by her appetite for mass media. She often quoted mass media news as ultimate truth. She diametrically opposed it as the ultimate lie. She rarely formed her own opinion. She went from the arms of one man to another, without knowing the difference, changing channels, changing sex partners, the same day, the same bed. She went as far as not washing herself between her encounters to keep together inside her the semen of both lovers.

lumpen. I was sitting with three well-known, successful painters at a fashionable downtown Manhattan restaurant. I was the only non-art world person at the table. I asked the painters, earnestly, with no conscious trace of antagonism, what it actually felt like, on an emotional level, to know that each time they picked up a paintbrush, they were making something for millionaires? I was really curious. Instantly the painters--a few of whom were millionaires themselves--pounced on me vigorously. I was excoriated, and I mean *excoriated*, as a fool and a savage, unworthy, even to sit at their table because I did not understand the fundamental truth that art has always been, and is intended to be, for the leisure class. Do you

Leo Wyoming (Stanley Marsh),
Ant Farm (Chip Lord, Hudson
Marquez, Douglas Michaels),
video artists, *Cadillac Ranch*

They say they're artists. I say they're Cadillac lovers.

As a commercial selling tool, I think the American art gallery is one of the most successful ever invented, and certainly more lucrative than advertising on a local tv station. You can buy *Batman*, the movie, which cost over fifty million dollars to produce, for \$19.95 at your local video store. Or if you prefer, you can buy a work of video art by Mary Lucier, *Wilderness*, which features slow or non-moving pictures of attractive scenery on seven TV monitors, for about \$75,000. My personal preference would be to purchase seven television monitors at Crazy Eddie's, buy seven copies of *Lawrence of Arabia*, and program that epic film at various intervals on each monitor. Of course, if this were done at an art gallery, I might claim the whole installation as *my* work and really clean up. But I think I'd rather lend it out, like a book, than sell it. So sue me

Todd Gitlin,
sociology professor, University of
California, Berkeley, and editor,
Watching Television

Postmodernist art echoes the fact that the arts have become auxiliary to sales.

ime. In seeking to ally themselves exclusively with the museum world, dominated for centuries by painting and sculpture, video artists are trying to adapt to a tradition which is non-specific to, and in some cases, intolerant of, their chosen means of communication. The increasing fragrance with which the "Art World" addresses its capital gain-crazed subtext does not invite art which cannot be commodified. Even video installation—that aspect of video art which is, to me and to many others, the most powerful expression of

this embryonic medium to date-- takes up an awful lot of space in a collector's living room. And even in hip, "happening" biennials, video art may be boisterously sub-categorized into a lesser status than painting and sculpture. Trustees

Steven Fagin,
video artist

Being a video artist in the art world is like being at the kids' table at a bar mitzvah. The adults' table is Painting and Sculpture. And they're usually liberal enough to throw us some food.

Given the paltry screening opportunities for "serious" television work, is it in the interest of artists to isolate themselves from TV due to a presumed, but barely tested, belief in the enforced limitations of commercial media? Instead of contraction into xenophobic resolve to avoid The Vast Wasteland, how about expansion into a pioneering spirit? Commercial television needs more people who think and read like artists, to save it from itself. I wish that artists drawn to the medium of television would form a sort of "Peace Corps" of the

Martha Gever,
editor and media critic

imagination: Donate their ideas to the savagely underdeveloped nation known as The Television Industry. Leave the halls of ivy and pick a little lettuce. Organize, and

Art that turns its back on the social institutions that surround and support it won't change much. And video practice blind to the social functions of the communications industry cannot be critical.

In my view artists who have never been to the bowels of commercial television can be as naive as L.A. showbiz types who degrade an abstract painting because, "any two-year old can fingerpaint that." I wish artists interested in cautionary video about corporate television would a) see what it is really like to work in the salt mines before declaring how hazardous they are to our general health, or b) see what it is like to work in the salt mines to discover whether or not their own enlightenment can reduce the hazard to our general health.

One of the many reasons television can sink as low as it does is because there aren't enough people who care about ideas who are willing to dirty

Eric Bogosian,
performance artist

This was the challenge. How was I going to make a piece that was enjoyable for a sophisticated audience that was also for people who don't sit around and think conceptual things all day long. They don't get heavy about stuff, they just want to go out and have a good time. ...I found a way to do it. I start the show dark, become funnier toward the middle, and end up dark again. Keep them at a distance, then bring them in with something they enjoy. Three quarters of the way through the audience is laughing and they think it's all just a big joke.

rubber fetishists of the world unite.

Cynthia Schneider and Todd Haynes pulled a fast one over on A&M Records a couple of years ago with their *The Karen Carpenter Story*. It is their version of the prime time television movie about our most famous anorexic. It doesn't tell you much about

Karen Carpenter, but it speaks volumes about television, and about ourselves as television watchers. There is a full-blown "Carpenters" music track, and a very prime time movie-of-the-week script to go with the pathetically-on-purpose minimalism of their cast, all of whom are Barbie (or Ken) dolls. In one, deft, deconstructivist punchline, Schneider and Haynes lift scenes from the actual, syrupy TV movie about this hideously wraith-like mainstream song bird, and "enact" it with dolls. Like Chip Lords' *Easy Living*, the use of non-humans says everything about our humanity. And as long as you are listening to a standardized soundtrack of a recognizable television genre, your experience is that of a full fledged commercial television event. It would make very little difference to our experience if real actors suddenly took the place of dolls. TV actors, are after all, Barbie dolls. And watching TV is not, after all, watching real life, etc.

For Haynes and Schneider to depersonalize so vividly the television theatrical moment is to re-focus our consciousness as media consumers to the point where we can

Stuart Schneiderman,
psychoanalyst and author,
Freud and The Rat Man

observe where, and how, we are being manipulated. Haynes and Schneider accomplish this, not incidentally, while being both riveting and ravingly funny. It can be done. Even on the cheap.

I watch TV every night. My favorite show is *Cheers*.

syndication. If I attempt to goad "artists" into making their presence known in the arena of corporate communications, it is not the same thing as asking them to contribute the body of their work to television companies. It's their attitude and talent that's needed. Even the work of those artists best suited for commercial TV—such as Michael Smith—is not

always "professional" enough for the airwaves. And by that I mean professional both in content and in production value.

Americans are spoiled visually. I speak not only as someone from the velvet-lined entertainment world, but also as part of a generation (and generations to come) of the media-smart. One of the most off-putting things about a great deal of video art is how amateurish it can look. This *can* be a very positive element. "Cheapness" as Haynes and Schneider display in their *Karen Carpenter Story* can be a virtue. I would never condemn work simply because it is not abundantly funded. But it may be time for certain videoists to hang up their portapaks. It's just as hard to watch bad-looking video as it is to read a handwritten book. There's absolutely nothing wrong with a handwritten book, as long as you aren't trying to pass it off as a laser-printed best seller.

Steve Fagin

You have to turn cheapness into charm. A work shouldn't be bad simply because it's not good video.

When a "downtown" videoist reaches for "uptown" theatricality such as long form drama—the format of the original prime time *Karen Carpenter Story*—he or she had either be technically equipped to compete with big bucks TV and films, or imaginative enough to fake it. In such tapes as *Volcano Saga* by Joan Jonas or *The Bad Sister* by Peter Wollen, dramatic flair and ambitious storylines are trashed by the poverty of the production design. The obviously limited editing choices of these "on a wing and a prayer" productions severely compromises the effectiveness of their stories, in my opinion. The videomakers' desire to tell a story exceeds their ability to tell it. You can't play chess with a checkers set. If you want to be taken seriously get serious about production technique.

Alien Rucker I was more of a fraud when I was with TVTV than I am now as a so-called "mainstream" TV producer. What we were doing at TVTV was slapdash video. Trying to organize chunks of reality, but actually just vamping.

take offense. "Broadcast quality" has plagued some videoists, while it has made others defiant. Today despite improvement in technology and its availability to the independent producer, it is still next to impossible to make something shot from \$20,000 look anything like something shot for \$2 million, which is about what the first *Karen Carpenter Story* cost. The Haynes-Schneider version—with those non-union, non-temperamental Barbie dolls—aims so far in the other direction that production value's importance to overall artistic quality is rendered completely moot.

Douglas Davis
Artculture: Essays on the Post-Modern
Video Culture

It is absurd for video artists not to be willing to be accountable for the effect upon audiences of whatever their production limitations happen to be.

Nam June Paik once told me that he always discovers more in his work when he sees it broadcast than he put into it.

Real TV has a kind of energy that can't be duplicated in an art gallery or a museum.

Chris Burden, media and
performance artist on
paying for ad time
from *Famous For Ten Minutes*
by Carole Ann Klonarides

and real TV is, by the way, a bitch. Learning to live with its terms even a little, has taken me at least a decade of pain and anguish. Most of my artist friends probably have too much self-love to put

up with the conditions I work with, and I respect that. They wouldn't stand for their paintings being touched up by the various dealers and collectors who appreciate the works on their way to a museum. That is essentially what happens to a show business writer's work on its way to the screen.

And yet it has been my experience, as someone who has worked in both the art and entertainment worlds, that the constraints of working in a capitalist society are not limited to only one portion of that society. There is no free lunch, even in a museum. Today thanks mostly to longevity I get to write pretty much what I want to write. But I may still need a hack job to pay the rent sometimes. As this article goes to press, I'm writing (and associate producing) a very weird, very fringe movie with a big star and a tight Hollywood package. It might actually get made. The money comes from executives who've been associated with funding a few of the most ground-breaking small budget films of the last five years. But if I run out of money I'll try writing a sitcom before I go back to waitressing. Fundamentally, I feel a whole lot less censored now than I ever did, and less censored than many of the endangered species now trying to secure public funding within the context of the art world.

Writing in commercial television and films is like being a surrogate mother. You give birth, but you can't raise the child. Everything you write is "Baby M". What you retain, however—and this is an important historical first for the labor force—is guaranteed equity in the profits and *resale*, and ownership of your own work. I am labor. And I belong to a union. And, unlike your average art dealer—who takes fifty or sixty percent of an artist's revenues—my agent can take no more than ten percent of what I earn, in exchange for contractually and legally protecting me at all times.

INT. TAYLOR'S OFFICE

your
correspondent,
Entwined,
first run pay TV
film, Lifetime
Entertainment

In a gleaming high rise with a dazzling Manhattan view, Taylor-dressed, as always, to kill—carries on many phone and in-person conversations at once. People rush in and out. Phones buzz. Pandemonium equals business-as-usual. The walls are crammed with awards, press clippings and photos revealing that this is Command Central for *The Marc Davenport Show*, daytime TV's number one and most exciting talk show. Behind Taylor is a huge, framed photo of the man himself—Davenport—a handsome, thick-haired, trustworthy grinner of 52.

Taylor faces a floor-to-ceiling bulletin board. At its top are large cards labeled with days of the work week. Under the days are cards with the names of celebrities or hot topics, e.g.: Divorce Lawyers. Reincarnation. Cholesterol. Brooke Shields. Kitty Dukakis. Chris Evert. Taylor's very young assistants, SONYA and LARS, tack new names onto the board and field calls. A manicurist starts work on Taylor's nails.

TAYLOR
(on phone)

I know the rain forest thing is important, but who cares what Morgan Fairchild thinks about it? Call me back.

(on second phone)

Linda, listen. I said it's okay to do a show on embryos, but I don't want to see the embryos. Let's stick to the custody issues. ..They look like seahorses, for God's sake!

(to Lars)

Find me an articulate, clean, sane, gregarious homeless person by Thursday.

Lars nods curtly and exists, bumping into MARC DAVENPORT, Mr. Charisma, who signals his need for Taylor's attention. She signals back, "Be Right There!" Sonya holds up a card that reads GLORIA ESTEFAN. Taylor nods and points to the bulletin board, under BACK INJURY WEEK. Sonya holds up another card reading BLIND GOLFERS. Taylor points to the bulletin board, under COURAGE WEEK. Marc peruses a row of vibrators on Taylor's desk.

SONYA

They're for "Orgasm Week."

A gorgeous hunk in shorts enters to give Taylor a massage as she gets off the phone and smiles at Marc.

MARC

You booked a ballet dancer.

TAYLOR

You asked me to.

MARC

I didn't say "ballet." I said "belly." A belly dancer! I don't know anything about ballet! I'll look stupid!

TAYLOR

She doesn't want to talk about dancing. She's here to talk about bulimia.

MARC

Oh. Well. That's fine. I'm excellent on bulimia.

...Lars rushes in, gasping for breath.

LARS

Barbara Bush just cancelled!

MARC

What?!! God, no!!

Others rush into the office. Everyone but Taylor is in a tizzy.

TAYLOR

Lars, get the elevator guy from Poland up here. Sonya, get the guy in the deli who makes the pepper beef. He's from Roumania. Frank, scoot across the street and bring over that cute Russian couple that runs the dry cleaners.

Everyone stares at Taylor in panicked confusion. She smiles.

TAYLOR

The Fall of the Iron Curtain: An Immigrant's Perspective!"
Run! We've only got twenty-five minutes.
Everyone madly dashes out.

MARC

Barbara Bush owes us a big one.

TAYLOR

I know. We'll collect.

Iraqis.

I don't discount the self-limiting economics of corporate media, but neither would I discount the self-limiting economics of the patronage/federal funding/non-profit route to media funding.

I sold the first TV script I ever wrote to Columbia Pictures in 1977. That is, I.

showed them the script, but what they bought was the idea. I didn't yet know that you don't sell scripts to TV executives. TV executives hate to be caught reading. You could hand them the original manuscript of *The Brothers Karamazov* and what they would buy would be "a story about four Russian brothers and their drunken father." Then they'd try to relocate the story in Arizona, make the father the mother, and call it *Those Crazy Carter Boys*.

That first TV script of mine, *Yonder*, was never made into the series I dreamed it should become, i.e., a revolutionary populist serial in the tradition of Mark Twain. A few years later, though, I applied for and received a small grant to re-do *Yonder* as a radio production at ZBS Media in Fort Edward, New York. *Yonder* became *The Insiders' Lounge*, an NEA/NYSCA funded radio musical, which has a loyal cadre of cult followers today, thanks to its recurring presence over Canadian airwaves and over non-profit public stations. A few years later I reworked *Insiders' Lounge* into a live stage musical complete with live, satellite radio hookups for Dance Theater Workshop in New York City. I then received a fellowship—from the American Film Institute—to turn *The Insiders' Lounge* into an independent television comedy via the AFI's McMurray Award in Television Comedy.

Meanwhile I was supporting myself writing a TV pilot for CBS and a mini-series comedy for HBO. I applied for the AFI fellowship to do something weird. Something I couldn't do on network TV. I turned *The Insiders' Lounge* into *The Rec Room*, which I dubbed a "postmodern TV comedy" and proceeded to develop it in residence at AFI's Los Angeles headquarters.

Halfway through my writing process AFI negotiated with NBC Television to broadcast a one-hour prime time TV special featuring excerpts from material written by

students from an AFI sitcom workshop . The sketches selected for NBC from that workshop were conventional sitcom fare. AFI administrators—in an attempt to make their institution look a little more interesting than a sitcom mill—decided to include an excerpt from my rather weird piece-in-progress. This would show everyone how daring AFI could be. This despite the fact that my piece was never meant to be something for prime time. I spent four months softening and altering *The Rec Room* to fit The NBC Special. In addition to accessorizing their public image with my work, AFI got the benefit of my show business contacts—actors and executives—who had offered their services to my piece and thereby, by implication at least, to the entire AFI Comedy Special.

And yet AFI went to enormous lengths to disguise the real nature of my participation in the TV special. Although I had nothing to do with the sitcom writing workshop AFI described me in all press material as just another workshop member who had written something a little strange, but what the heck. Even though I was an Emmy-winning TV writer, they refused to describe me in their publicity as anything but an up and coming writer. The McMurray Award, given in recognition of prior achievements in television and comedy, was never mentioned.

AFI's motivation in all this had to do with their eagerness to draw favorable attention to the AFI beginner's writing workshops which existed in collaboration with well-heeled industry heavyweights and the television networks. AFI, a non-profit institution, used me to further their own press and financial interests, at the expense of my own hard won professional reputation.

After the NBC Special aired I planned to go back to producing the original version of *The Rec Room*, as I had always intended it to be done. However, AFI informed me that my entire production grant and all fellowship privileges had vanished into thin air.

Without telling me or anyone associated with The McMurray Award trustees, AFI had magically absorbed my entire grant and its budget into their NBC sitcom special. Not only did they use me, they used my grant money. When I tried to protest I was given an IBM typewriter and told what an ingrate I was having had "the privilege" of network TV exposure.

Today I am trying to produce *The Rec Room* on my own, with much difficulty, and at the same time trying to re-launch its antecedent, *Yonder* in commercial television. It has come full circle, with time out for bad behavior from a non-profit arts institution.

These things happen. *So, nu.* But they happen just as easily at arts organizations as at the networks. I can usually play "heads up ball" with show business moguls. But the capriciousness of an arts administrator can sometimes be too subtle a form of abuse to redress. Besides—and I'm not entirely alone in this—I tend to feel so damn grateful to people who give me grants that I always wind up leaving myself wide open for exploitation and over-exertion.

The barons of industry, who ultimately pull the strings for both arts and commercial organizations, would find the distinctions we attempt to make between them a very good joke, indeed. Is *your* money cleaner than *my* money? Does it show more integrity to take orders from an employee at NBC, or to sell your art to the Chairman of the Board of General Electric, NBC's parent company? Do we simply worship the influence of the richest and most powerful after all?

What we fear in the nature of censorship and propaganda can become a reality within the grant and patronage-sponsored bureaucracy just as easily as within the advertising bureaucracy. When Oliver North decides to take a job at Disney instead of joining forces with Senator Helms, maybe I'll change my tune. But at a time when

politicians of the acknowledged far right are attempting to persuade the population to withdraw support for artists based upon the most hideously mercurial of reasons, it may be interesting to rediscover the freedoms inherent in the madness of the marketplace.

What makes an empire evil? Its religious fanatics or its bankers?

Andy Warhol and entourage,
media artists,

in a guest appearance on

The Love Boat, a popular TV
series

Q: How do you know if a work of art is a success?

A: When the check clears.

I was so enchanted to get a breather from the closed-mindedness of Hollywood that I ignored the close-mindedness of the art world, at first. But in the last several years I've come to understand that some of my perceptions of the art world were highly romanticized, and I'm fond of saying, today, that the art world makes show business look like a zendo. I can now see the commodification and investment/marketing rituals, where all I wanted to see before was purity of intention. I meet artists whose lifestyles are utterly indistinguishable from those of Beverly Hills tax lawyers. I notice that some artists will puff up their work with trendy intellectual theory in order to be accepted by the critics, whether they grasp the theory or not. And the inflationary feeding frenzy of art sales recalls the same commercial hype and manipulation that Hollywood accepts as routine. To embrace this aspect of the "art world" and still try to present oneself as free from crass commercial restraints or unblemished by the bacteria of pop seems worthy of a major acting award. Take

Peter Kirby,
video producer,
Whither Video Art?

Video Art remains a stepchild of the art world, still called into question by the public. Even the boards of many of the institutions which present video art have a hard time accepting the exhibition of video as "high art."

— constraints. What do you think the court painters were doing in the Renaissance and Middle Ages? Sneaking rotten fruit into the still life. Adding a smirking dwarf in the background of the duchess' portrait. Or a peeing terrier under the Virgin's throne. Or, the artist him/herself leering at us from behind a plush Vatican curtain. How do you think the artists got their vision past the Royals? J.S. Bach had a noble patron who was an insomniac. He asked Bach to write him some music that would help him go to sleep at night. Bach accepted the assignment. It was called *The Goldberg Variations*.

— Ernie Kovacs. *The Honeymooners*. David Letterman's monkeycam. Stupid Pet Tricks and POV DOG home movies. William Wegman's guest appearance on the *Letterman Show* in which Man Ray did the original Stupid Pet Tricks. Andy Kaufman's regular appearance on *Taxi*. *Saturday Night Live* most of the time. Tracey Ullman. Gary Shandling talking to the camera a la George Burns. George Burns. Nam June Paik's set for CBS *Sunday Morning*. Robert Longo directing music videos. William Wegman working for *Sesame Street*. *Roe vs. Wade* on network TV. *Brothers*, Showtime's long-running series about homosexuals. Eddie Murphy using the "F" word 312 times in a single HBO special. *Max Headroom* shot by Paul Goldsmith formerly of TVTV. *The History of White People in America* produced by Allen Rucker formerly of TVTV. John Sayles' *Shannon's Deal*. David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. David Sanborn's Sunday night avant garde jazz show.

...a few of the things that have appeared on Big Time commercial TV (Not PBS. Not Bravo. Not A&E.) Oases in the Vast Wasteland? Flukes? I wrote for *Charles in Charge*. I read *October*. What to make of it all?

Allen Rucker

I was asked to present my work to students at The Art Institute of Chicago. I was supposed to present them as theoretical, historical, and aesthetic. But when I did, the kids weren't interested. Then I changed my tactics. I presented them as showbiz, and even presented myself as a showbiz hack. The kids loved it—and they watched the stuff.

face the music. Where does one go, though, with ideas that are too abstract or too personal--too anything--for big time commercial TV? Is the *soi-disant* art world the only alternative? Is this a global village or a two-horse town? In every other medium we could think of there is ample acceptance for both "high" and "low" forms of expression, and the two usually cross-pollinate at some eventual level. But "high" art has still to define its distribution mechanisms in the medium of television. Most "high" television art is profoundly unavailable and unknown to most of the population. At least you know where to go to find "high" art in painting, music, dance, etc., even if you have no interest in finding it. But almost no one outside the museum world even knows that there is a rarified form of television and that it can be seen, pretty much exclusively, in modern museums and art galleries, or on esoterically-programmed slots on local public TV stations (which dimly promote the work, if at all). I can count on the thumb of one hand the number of

video rental stores in greater Los Angeles which stock "high art" along with commercial film releases, while the three such outlets in Manhattan went out of business quicker than you can wink your eye. Why is video so hard to see?

We have not seen video yet.

sure. I don't consider video art to be as Peter Kirby said, "the stepchild" of the art world. I think it's the child of divorce in an unresolved custody battle between "high" and "low" forms of artistic expression in the still-dysfunctional medium of television. We don't need high-resolution giant screens. We need therapy.

In 1987 I began producing *Viewpoints on Video* for the Long Beach Museum of Art. This was a one-hour program of video art works shown on fourteen cable systems through the state on a regularly scheduled basis. Often the works were the same ones on exhibit at the museum. One of the volunteers who had been with the museum for years, and who never went upstairs because that was where the "video" was (and she knew from past experience that she didn't like it) saw the first program at home. The next day she said that she never really understood video art before, and had actually liked some of the program. Perhaps she even understood that "video art" is a term with almost no meaning beyond the obvious one, and that there is good work and not so good work, as in any other aspect of human creativity.

Peter Kirby,
Whither Video Art?

Stay tuned. Stay very tuned. Whoever is feeding you information is a dummy. With no mouth.

Jerry Saltz, visual arts
curator, from Illinois,
to Gretchen
Ferguson, student
from Saskatchewan,

Q: What is postmodernism?

A: It's artists talking to other artists.

daughter of Bruce Ferguson, media arts critic/writer, from Montreal, at a Vietnamese restaurant, in Chinatown, in Manhattan, at a party for Nancy Bowen, a sculptor, from Rhode Island, on her way to Rome, sitting next to your correspondent, a screenwriter, from Chicago, living in the Tribeca loft of David Diau, painter from China introduced to her by Marilyn Minter, conceptual painter, from Florida, and former collaborator with Christof Kohlhöfer, from Germany, a place I have never been to.

Aren't there places you have never been to? China? Germany? Television City?
Everywhere walls are coming down.

Dear Gummo,

Last night I had dinner with my celebrated pen pal, T.S. Elliot. It was a memorable evening. Your correspondent arrived at the Elliot's fully prepared for a literary evening. During the week I had read *Murder in the Cathedral* twice; *The Waste Land* three times; and just in case of a conversational bottleneck, I brushed up on *King Lear*. Well sir, as cocktails were served, there was a momentary lull—the kind that is more or less inevitable when strangers meet for the first time. So I tossed in a quotation from *The Waste Land*. That, I thought will show him I've read a

Groucho Marx,
from *The Best of Modern Humor*
edited by Mordecai Richler

thing or two besides my press notices from vaudeville. Elliot smiled faintly—as though to say he was thoroughly familiar with his poems and didn't need me to recite them. So I took a whack at *King Lear*. ...That, too, failed to bowl over the poet. He seemed more interested in discussing *Animal Crackers* and *A Night At The Opera*. He quoted a joke—one of mine—that I had long since forgotten. Now it was my turn to smile faintly. [Elliot] asked if I remembered the courtroom scene in *Duck Soup*. Fortunately I'd forgotten every word. It was obviously the end of the Literary Evening but very pleasant nonetheless.

Yours, Groucho Marx

anyway,

Itam, Hakim Hoplit is not a straight documentary.

We often do a disservice to

social conditions by imposing

the traditional documentary format.

It's too familiar.

It doesn't make you think.

People see it and have a tendency to forget it.

Victor Masayesva